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# GIANTS OF NONVIOLENCE

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## Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.



James Morris Lawson Jr. is an American activist and university professor. He was a leading theoretician and tactician of nonviolence within the Civil Rights Movement

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From Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Lawson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Lawson)):

**B**orn in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, Lawson grew up in Massillon, Ohio. While a freshman at Baldwin Wallace College in Berea, Ohio, he joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), an organization founded by A.J. Muste, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), an organization affiliated with FOR. Both FOR and CORE advocated nonviolent resistance to racism; CORE conducted sit-ins in some northern cities in the late 1940s and embarked on a freedom ride more than a decade before the more famous ones of the early 1960s.

Consistent with those principles of nonviolence, Lawson declared himself a conscientious objector and refused to report for the draft in 1951. He served fourteen months in prison after refusing to take either a student or ministerial deferment.

After his release from prison, Lawson went as a Methodist missionary to Nagpur, India, where he studied satyagraha, the principles of nonviolence resistance that Mahatma Gandhi and his followers had developed. He returned to the United States in 1955, entering the Graduate School of Theology at Oberlin College in Ohio

### Work with Martin Luther King, Jr. (1957-68)

One of his Oberlin professors introduced him to Martin Luther King, Jr., who had led the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Montgomery, Alabama and had also embraced Gandhi's principles of nonviolent resistance. King urged Lawson to come South, telling him "Come now. We don't have anyone like you down there."

Lawson moved to Nashville, Tennessee and enrolled at the Divinity School of Vanderbilt University, where he served as the southern director for FOR and began conducting nonviolence training workshops for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. While in Nashville, Lawson met and mentored a number of young students at Vanderbilt, Fisk University, and other area schools in the tactics of nonviolent direct action. Among the students whom Lawson trained were a number of future leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, among them Diane Nash, James Bevel, Marion Barry and John Lewis.



Lawson was arrested a number of times for his work in the Civil Rights movement.

The activists trained by Lawson launched a series of sit-ins to challenge segregation in Nashville's downtown stores in 1960. These activists, and others from Atlanta, Georgia and elsewhere in the South joined to form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in April 1960. SNCC played a leading role in the Freedom Rides, the 1963 March on Washington, Mississippi Freedom Summer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party over the next few years. Lawson's expulsion from Vanderbilt as a result of these activities became one of the celebrated incidents of the era and eventually a source of deep embarrassment to the university. During the 2006 graduation ceremony the university apologized for its treatment of Lawson, and Lawson is currently serving as a Vanderbilt faculty member.

**“Sud accumsan libero pretium pharetra quis. Nunc elit lorem magna vitae.”**

*-DIAM NOBIS*

Lawson became pastor of Centenary Methodist Church in Memphis, Tennessee in 1962. In 1968, when black sanitation workers went on strike for higher wages and union recognition after two of their co-workers were accidentally crushed to death, Reverend Lawson served as chairman of their strike committee. (See Memphis Sanitation Strike)

Reverend Lawson invited Dr. King to Memphis in April 1968 to dramatize their struggle, which had adopted the slogan I am a Man.

Dr. King delivered his famous "Mountaintop" speech in support of the strike in Memphis on April 3, 1968, the day before his assassination.

## Continued advocacy of nonviolent struggle

Reverend Lawson moved to Los Angeles in 1974 to lead Holman United Methodist Church where he served for 25 years before retiring in 1999. He has continued to train activists in nonviolence and to work in support of a number of causes, including immigrants' rights in the United States and the rights of Palestinians, opposition to the war in Iraq, and workers' rights to a living wage. In 2004, he received the Community of Christ International Peace Award.



Lawson was expelled from Vanderbilt University, an action that caused considerable embarrassment to the university in later years.

Reverend Lawson took part in a well-publicized 3 day Freedom Ride commemorative program sponsored by Vanderbilt University's Office of Active Citizenship and Service in January 2007. The program included an educational bus tour to Montgomery and Birmingham, Alabama. Participants also included fellow Civil Rights activists Jim Zwerg, Diane Nash, Bernard Lafayette, Rev. C.T. Vivian as well as John Seigenthaler, Sr., journalists and approximately 180 students, faculty and administrators from Vanderbilt, Fisk, Tennessee State University and American Baptist.

## James Lawson, 2000-01 Luce Lecturer on Urban Ministry, Continues to Witness and Protest

*From Harvard Divinity School online bulletin ([http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news/article\\_archive/lawson.html](http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news/article_archive/lawson.html))*

by Wendy S. McDowell

The Reverend James Lawson admits that it sometimes troubles him when people view him as a living artifact of the civil rights movement, especially because he has been arrested for civil disobedience more times in the last 10 years than he ever was during the 1950s and 60s.

Although there is no denying that Lawson is one of the important figures of the civil rights movement, a man respected and loved for that rare mix of gentleness and unquenchable thirst for justice, he is not one to rest on laurels. It is humble understatement when he says he has "remained active in a great variety of ways."

In fact, Lawson has continued to demonstrate and to resist over a wide range of issues including poverty, Iraq, gay and lesbian issues, Central America, and racial profiling, while continuing to teach the theory and practice of nonviolence. Perhaps the only accurate way to describe his work is contained in this statement from him: "I continue to see my work as sowing the seeds of that revolution yet to happen." The fields he has sown are many and varied, through his work as a pastor, organizer, educator, and even host of a call-in show on the Odyssey cable-television network, Jim Lawson: Live.

In 2001, Harvard Divinity School has been one of the fields in which Lawson has chosen to sow, as the Luce Lecturer on Urban Ministry. This is an opportunity he sees as important because he believes the methods he teaches and practices need to be passed on to new generations at a time when Americans are being "weaned on violence." In his course "Nonviolence (Soul Force)—An Unexplored Human Option," he shares literature and personal experience about nonviolence. "It's aimed at the practical side," says Lawson, who studied Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi's techniques in Nagpur, India, before joining forces with Martin Luther King, Jr. King appointed Lawson to be director of nonviolent education for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the early 60s, soon after he had helped found the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee as a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School.

Lawson, who is 72 years old (at the time of this interview) and pastor emeritus at Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, believes that Americans need to learn nonviolent strategies now more than ever. "A lot of people feel that they are helpless, but the literature of nonviolence offers us over 200 weapons or methods for bringing about social and political change," he explains. "There are basic actions that still hold." Simply writing a letter of protest to the president of the United States, for example, is a good way "to get yourself into the mode of action," he says. The methods progress all the way to civil disobedience and "major marches, filling the streets, which continue to be effective."

The example of Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990, when marches in East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and other countries, "rarely reported about in the U.S. press, reached 300-350,000 people in relatively small cities," is an important one for Lawson. These marches, he points out, "included people surrounding tanks and talking with compassion to the soldiers who were set out to disperse them."

"They were very successful, bringing down the governments in Eastern Europe one by one," he adds. "Don't think you can abandon that weapon."

Pointing to the accessibility of weapons, the advancement of the national security state, and a successful movement by the religious right "to take over the media and adopt the language of people like King," Lawson says that "in many ways, we have a more perplexing and difficult task in the U.S. now than we did during the civil rights movement." Even so, he explains, "a nonviolent methodology helps us to get at that task, by bringing about change in a rational way, that is, by helping people to move from simple protest to protracted movement and struggle."



**Lawson was the person who introduced the principles and practice of Gandhian Nonviolence to Dr. King.**

Lawson does see enormous signs of hope in the number of groups active in social causes. "There are environmentalists, women's groups, anti-racism groups, groups for the well-being of children, and student groups protesting sweatshops," he says. "There are more activist groups than there ever were in the 50s and 60s, proving that there are tremendous numbers of Americans who are frustrated by the present moment and want change."

"I maintain that in the twenty-first century we will see sizeable national movements and campaigns seeking to create change," he continues, "because it is clear that the Democrats and Republicans are not going to make changes unless they are forced to by the impact of the people."

He also suspects that the repertoire of nonviolent methods will expand a bit in the light of technology to include "sabotaging the whole society by ganging up on computers, phone lines, and faxes." Yet Lawson knows firsthand that nothing can replace direct, grass-roots involvement, and some of his most interesting work in recent years has been through an interfaith group in the Los Angeles area, Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE).

This group has worked on a variety of issues, but Lawson sees a priority. "I think the major justice issue should be getting living wages for all workers," he says, referring to the United States and the rest of the world. "That issue is a derivation of slavery, which said there is an economic institution in the United States and it's all right to have people who work and live on a subsistence basis, gaining no serious benefits except enough food to stay alive so they can stay working."

In an effort to achieve a "revitalization of religion in relation to work," he and other religious leaders in the Los Angeles area have started a movement "getting workers to go tell their priests and ministers about the conditions they're facing in their work lives." This has caused "the conversion of a number of clergy," Lawson says, "and is "a movement I hope will grow."

As a man who served as pastor to churches in several parts of the country, and now as pastor emeritus at Holman United Methodist Church, Lawson has always acted from a Christian spiritual vision, and the second course he has been teaching at HDS this semester embodies the sort of church-based work he performs and nurtures. In the "Urban Ministry Seminar," Lawson instructs professional people who are engaged in all sorts of ministries in the Boston area. "That course is geared toward addressing the issues they bring—they set the agenda," he explains. But Lawson does not regard church-based work as being separate from political and economic activism. "The root causes of all 'issues' are in the spirit and spirituality of America," Lawson says. "Racism itself is a spiritual institution," girded by faulty religious arguments that "clearly go against the Christian-Jewish world view that God created us all in God's image."

Interviewed during Lent, Lawson reflected on the theological grounding of his own thinking. "I get a little disturbed by antiquated ritual," he said, "I don't think we need to be so limited in our understanding."

"Using the cross as God's wish to kill his son, in my judgment, is bad theology," he added. "The cross has mystery to it, and as a consequence has many different meanings to it. What about the cross as a man of the spirit who refused to run away when the Roman Empire raised its fist? Jesus could have left. He knew there were collaborators who wanted him dead, so he could have gone back to Galilee and returned another time. What about the cross as a man having decided, as Martin King decided, that 'there's a bullet waiting for me,' but who pursued his course anyway. What about Jesus refusing to take up the sword? What about the cross as a call to be prepared to take violence but not dish it out, as faithfulness to your own abiding convictions and confidence in God no matter the danger?"